

The Call Of The Sea

A pioneering cruise by an enterprising Indian team

The lure of the deep waters and the soaring spirit of adventure beckoned them to realise a magical dream. Part of the dream has been fulfilled. The remainder is yet to be. But the enthusiasm and the excitement, the tension and the trauma, still brim to the forefront whenever the talk turns to the high seas.

The Corps of Engineers of the Indian army, or 'The Sappers' as they are popularly known, have undertaken a new venture in ocean sailing. In the 1960's they cruised from Bombay to Goa and Bombay to Cochin, and in 1970 from Madras to Port Blair in the Andaman Islands. They sailed from Bombay to Bander Abbas in Iran and back, in 1977. The Sapper Adventure Foundation, a member of the Army Adventure Foundation, has now organised a sailing cruise around the world, the ultimate dream of every yachtsman. This is the first time that any Indians have attempted to traverse the world's seas and oceans in a yacht.

The 10-member team (though only six are on board at a time) completed the first phase of the voyage on 1st February this year, when their yacht *TRISHNA* arrived at Bombay after a 109 day cruise starting from Gosport (Britain) and covering the North Atlantic ocean, the Mediterranean sea, the Suez Canal, the Red Sea and the Indian ocean, with halts at La Coruna, Lisbon, Gibraltar, Ibiza, Malta, Kriti, Port Suez, Port Said, Port Sudan, Aden, Salalah and Muscat.

It could be called a 'sweet and sour' journey, as the team encountered squally and mild weather and turbulent and calm waters by turns. These were interspersed with a successful haul of fish from the Mediterranean, a beautiful sighting of a bevy of dolphins playfully "attacking" the yacht in the Arabian Sea, the mistaking of several whales for logs of wood and the enchanting phenomenon of hundreds of flying fish landing in the boat, in the Indian ocean.

The crew members have been chosen on the basis of their experience and



TRISHNA entering Bombay harbour: a "sweet-sour" journey

expertise in sailing; their youth—so that they can promote the sport in the country in the next ten to fifteen years; and their lack of major commitments at home.

"It has been a thrilling voyage," says Lt Col T P S Chowdhury, the team manager. "But we are looking forward to the second phase, beginning at the end of September, with even greater enthusiasm." The second leg of the world cruise will cover Mauritius and around the Cape of Good Hope (by-passing South Africa because there are no diplomatic relations between that country and India) to St Helena island. This part will take about 50 days and the yacht will have to contend with choppy seas and 50-60 feet high waves. From St Helena *TRISHNA* will set sail for the West Indies, another area where chronic bad weather prevails. It will not cross the infamous Bermuda Triangle where many a craft has been irrevocably lost. Sailing south of the Triangle, the yacht will touch Panama and reach Tahiti after crossing the Panama Canal. This stretch will take approximately 40 days to cover. Auckland will be reached after a 30-40 day sail from Tahiti. The crew has to be extra vigilant while traversing from Auckland to Sydney because of the innumerable coral reefs, the most dangerous one being the Great



Entire route of world cruise: braving international waters



Preparing meal in the yacht's kitchen: learning a new art

Barrier Reef. During the next part of the journey to Indonesia, navigation will be difficult. The crew will have to manoeuvre through thousands of tiny islands in Indonesia to reach Java and then Singapore. The penultimate halt will be at Colombo in Sri Lanka before finally ending the voyage at Bombay. From the scheduled sailing period of one and a half years to complete the cruise, 12-13 months will be spent in actual sailing, 5-6 months have been kept as reserve in case of any eventuality leading to delay and the remainder has been allocated for repairs, halts and crossings.

The entire first phase has been filmed on video by the crew. "The yacht itself and our activities on board have been captured on film," informed Major A K Singh, who incidentally, is the first sailor with an amputated leg to brave the world's waters. Their movements at each port, the squally weather during certain stretches and the changing of sails have also been filmed. "We have also filmed the varied and beautiful marine life we encountered during the voyage", added Major K S Rao.

But the crew's infectious high spirits dampen a bit when queried about the expenditure of the expedition. They are eagerly looking for sponsors to fill the gap of Rs 10 lakh in the total budget

of Rs 25 lakh. The funds collected so far have come from the Ministry of Defence, the Chief of the Army Staff, the Army Adventure Foundation, the Sapper Adventure Foundation, Air-India (air tickets and carrying of stores for the yacht, etc.), the Ministry of

Sports and Oil India. "For a national venture like this, we expected sponsors to come forward enthusiastically. We do hope that very soon many organisations will agree to sponsor the sailing cruise," said Lt Col Chowdhury. He added that the name of the sponsor will be prominently displayed on the side of the boat and the sponsor's flag will also be flown throughout the journey.

From March to April the crew will be on a training cruise from Bombay to Goa, Laccadives and back. The entire team will also undergo refresher training in navigation, morse, meteorology and passage planning during the period May-September. The yacht *TRISHNA* has been taken out of water and all damages are being repaired before it gets a fresh coat of paint. Water tanks will be modified for a larger capacity of 150 gallons and rigging checked for safety.

The crew, whose major activities on board include (apart from navigation) listening to music and news, hearing weather forecasts regularly on the radio, letter-writing, filling personal diaries and official logs, are impatiently awaiting the start of the second phase of the cruise around the world. May their thirst for adventure be successfully appeased and their enterprising spirit find fulfilment in many more voyages to come.

—Madhusri Das



Lt Gen P R Puri, patron of cruise (right) conversing with crew members (left to right) Maj K S Rao, Capt M S Pillai, Maj A K Singh, Lt S Shekhar, Lt C Bharti and Lt Col T P S Chowdhury on arrival at Bombay: boosting spirits